SEGMENTS OF SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE

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The two volumes[1] selected as the occasion for the present comments are significant additions to the growing literature centering on the Fugitives and Agrarians, often and perhaps more appropriately called the Nashville group of writers. The foreword to Andrew Lytle's volume is by Allen Tate, and the volume itself contains tributes to both Tate and John Crowe Ransom. The intimately reminiscential introduction to John Donald Wade's volume is by the late Donald Davidson. Back in the twenties and thirties the published talk of the writers of this group about one another sometimes seemed a belligerent demand for recognition. Now that the sifting of time has brought that deserved recognition, the habit has continued as a reminder of lifelong and creatively fruitful friendships. Because of the critical and self-revelatory nature of the volumes under consideration, they afforded opportunity to look over the other works of these two writers.

Andrew Lytle's first independently published work was a biography, *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company,* written when the author was twenty-eight years old, but already it was clear that his chief talent is fictional. On the very first page, by the use of characteristic idiom, he establishes his post of observation inside the mind of Forrest's mother. And though this method is not continued throughout the volume, it enables the writer to establish immediately his "fictional" illusion. Also the infectious commitment to his main character and his treatment of historical events as growing out of, or essentially affected by, the nature of the military leaders, taught him early the interplay of action and setting which, in *The Velvet Horn* (1957), he was finally able to apply apparently to his own satisfaction in a larger piece of fiction.

The Long Night (1936), Lytle's first novel, grew out of a family tradition recounted to him by Frank Owsley, one of the best Southern historians and a member of the Nashville group of writers. It is a series of episodes held together by the narrator of the tale, Pleasant McIvor, who tells how he was able to take revenge on the murderers of his father in mid-nineteenth-century Alabama. But it falls apart into a series of separate stories, which it seems essentially to be. It is redeemed by its skilful use of historical detail. And nobody in modern fiction is better than Lytle with battle scenes, a lesson learned well in his biography of Forrest and practiced with

convincing effect not only in *The Long Night* but also in his second novel, *At the Moon's Inn* (1941), which deals with the conquests and defeats of De Soto in Florida.

His third novel, *A Name for Evil* (1947), set in the twentieth century and in his favorite locale of rural Tennessee, combines Jamesian subtlety and Gothic horror in a tale in which the narrator's wife is destroyed by the ghost of an ancestor. Tate, in his foreword to *The Hero with the Private Parts,* lists it along with *The Velvet Horn* as Lytle's two best works of fiction. I should rather place one or two of Lytle's superb short stories with *The Velvet Horn* as representing his best work. *A Name for Evil* is flawed, I believe, by a confusion of underlying symbolism. I do not agree with Bradbury in his mediocre volume on the Fugitives when he implies that Lytle does not know what he is doing: "Like James' ghost [in "The Turn of the Screw"] it represents an essentially evil principle, but at the same time it here belongs to historical tradition, which, as the commentary makes clear, is the desideratum for the narrator."[2] But I do not believe that this shortest of Lytle's novels loses fictional integrity apparently because of over-subtlety and complexity of meaning. This novel also exhibits a tendency in some of Lytle's early work to include little essays which are imperfectly assimilated into action or character. For instance, the tenant's wife has just used the given name of the narrator's wife and the narrator comments: "I felt both anger and pity for the woman. The unique triumph of universal education is the successful way it debases the mind. Besides making the ignorant arrogant, this spun sugar of our political carnival has corrupted manners." And so on for a half page.[3]

The Velvet Horn again utilizes rural Tennessee as its setting, this time in the mid-nineteenth century; the Civil War, however, is only a rumor in the fringes of the action. The family as an institution is almost always of central importance in Lytle's fiction. In this his last novel it provides the whole action. The novel tells the story of the Cropleigh family, four brothers and a sister. The foreground is a *bildungsroman* in which Lucius Cree, the bastard son of the sister, finds himself and learns how to live. But the background, the meaning, the enveloping action lie in the mind of Uncle Jack Cropleigh. Lytle seems to have found in this his masterpiece an almost perfect medium for his kind of story. All of us know—or think we know—that the mind when it works freely is a set of pictures which flash as if in a dream, so that logic and chronologic are held in abeyance, so that the mind at such times draws from forgotten experience and from the patterns somehow lodged in the brain itself since the beginning of human time. In

Jack Cropleigh Lytle renders this dreamwork of the waking mind as plausibly as Sterne and more simply than Faulkner. And Lytle the experimenter—he has never repeated himself in his fictional efforts—has also attained in this novel a subtle fusion of symbolic and narrative elements beside which his earlier attempts seem immature. The Cropleigh income is largely dependent on mule breeding, and Jack has bought a prize jackass from a widow, only to find that he has to buy and wear one of the widow's snuff-spattered dresses when he helps in the servicing of the mares.[4] A more striking example, since less dependent on detailed knowledge of text, occurs when Jack the man of words that hide reality, fatally shot by the halfwit Othel, looks at his bleeding wound and says, "See the words run out of my side!" (p. 368)

The Hero with the Private Parts, Lytle's work under present consideration, is composed mostly of book reviews, which are aptly described in Tate's foreword as a "kind of high programmatic criticism" and as "a formal effort of the imagination which places the writer inside the consciousness of Stephen Crane, Flaubert, Faulkner, Tolstoy." Actually these reviews are of the same substance as Lytle's classroom lectures and discussions. In his classes at Iowa, Florida, and Sewanee his constant attempt has been to teach students to *read,* as the only way in which they can be made to teach themselves to *write.* I suspect that it has been the general method of all the members of the Nashville group in their writing classes around the country for the past three or four decades—of Tate of North Carolina, Princeton, and Minnesota, of Davidson at Vanderbilt and Bread Loaf, of Ransom at Vanderbilt, Kenyon, and Indiana, of Warren at Louisiana State and Yale.

The Hero with the Private Parts is an exciting book. It enables the reader to correlate the fiction writer's theory and practice in an immediate and satisfying way. In this sense "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process" is the key item in the volume, for it gives Lytle's version of how he wrote *The Velvet Horn.* In this highly successful undertaking he utilizes the methods by which he has revealed the nature of the other works great and small in the other critical selections in the volume. Lytle asks, how does a writer get started? He says he began thinking about *The Velvet Horn* as "a long piece of fiction on a society that was dead." But he says it does not matter what sets you going, whether it is an idea, a situation, a character, a mood. Whatever it is, it is "like the after effect of shock" in which the consciousness "is suspended before the intuitive and instinctive action taking place within the mind." All during the earlier part of the process, he

says, a writer "is in danger of being misled by [his own] opinion. He is saved by the creative act."

Such statements of course are not new. Robert Frost said now and again in those dialogues with himself that he used to give as lectures, "There always comes a time when the poem takes the initiative away from you." And D. H. Lawrence says somewhere that the important thing is to save the artist from himself. But Lytle looks at the age-old problem so thoroughly yet so modestly that the reader convinces himself of its authority. Even when he seems to be wrong his complete honesty enhances this conviction on the part of the reader. In speaking of "The Water Witch," which Lytle calls the "Garden of Eden section of *The Velvet Horn*," he says, "Of course reading has helped me immensely," and he expresses surprise that at the time he was writing that section he just happened to be reading the right books, Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* and Neumann's *Origin and History of Consciousness.* Such a statement makes revealing intellectual history, but its *ex post facto* quality calls to mind Poe's brilliant hoax "The Philosophy of Composition." Somehow an imaginative nebula begins to turn, attracting all sorts of *disjecta membra* floating in the mind. If a writer is man enough, he is able to create his virtual world in spite of, just as plausibly as because of, the reading he happens to be doing at the time.

Lytle himself seems to have conceived of the title essay, "The Hero with the Private Parts," as occupying the key position in the volume, as the device for making a book out of his volume rather than just a series of essays. That is, much of the argument in the book suggests the thesis that the best fiction is cultural, institutional, archetypal, and that modern fiction is often weakened because in it the hero has only private parts to play. It is a strong essay, one capable of its purpose, if I have properly evaluated the author's intention. Still the title troubles me. Not that comic innuendoes in titles are objectionable. But if a title about a hero's private parts suggests to a reader (though the reader may be entirely wrong) that Lytle is laying greater emphasis on sexual exposure in modern literature than he obviously intended, then the title is misleading.

Another minor fault of the volume is the omission of dates of original publication of the items. In a work of this kind one is naturally interested in the developmental aspect of the writer. It would be informative if we knew when certain critical opinions were developed in the author's mind and could correlate them with the fiction he was writing at the same time. The three articles on

Faulkner are some of the best in the whole corpus of Faulkner criticism, and we assume that they were written when Faulkner's novels were first published. But we do not *know* this to be true. Anyway why should we be forced to guess or go to the trouble of finding out? It is to be hoped that in later printings this difficulty will be eliminated.

John Donald Wade (1892-1963) was preeminently a biographer. His first book, *Augustus Baldwin Longstreet,* written when he was thirty-two years old, prefigures Wade's whole career as a writer. Reading over the biographical selections in the volume under present consideration—on Henry Grady, Tom Watson, Joel Chandler Harris—one can feel the authority imparted by the wealth of original research on his first book, whose subtitle is *A Study in the Development of Culture in the South.* In style also this first volume sets the tone of much of the later writing. It is surprisingly mature, and in it he has already developed the knack of so placing the evidence that it provides its own commentary. One can feel the critical reserve of the author just below the surface. It is tempting to say rather "comical reserve" and to regard Wade as a humorist, especially as in some of his later writings this comic effect is more marked. But so to regard him is to give a wrong emphasis. For often in commentary of very high quality, the felt possibility of humor acts as a balancing influence, as the reader's assurance that he should not take the writer any more seriously than the evidence demands. Such a current of reserve imparts a richness, an irony, a completeness to the material otherwise apparently unattainable. For instance, in the Longstreet biography Wade quotes from *Georgia Scenes:* "Upon the western verge, in all his martial glory, stood Orion, his burnished epaulets and spangled sash with unusual brightness glowing. Capella glittered brighter still, and Castor, Procyon and Arcturus rivalled her in lustre. But Sirius reigned the monarch of the starry host, and countless myriads of lesser lights glowed and sparkled and twinkled o'er all the wide spread canopy." Then he says, "It was passages of this sort that won Longstreet his fame as a man of letters." Then he quotes an unnamed critic in the *Southern Literary Messenger* of 1840 on the same passage: "If there be anything defective in this style, if it be not really beautiful, we confess that we are much wanting in taste."[5] We laugh at the apt confession that reveals so much more than the confessor intended. The mind wanders to the preposterous nineteenth-century critical mentality that led Colonel Higginson, for instance, to try to correct Emily Dickinson's poetry. And Wade's own comment on the passage does not preclude the possibility that

Longstreet was indulging in stylistic burlesque on the sort of romantic description then in vogue.

This sophisticated authorial stance is coupled with Wade's talent for rendering some of his material from the standpoint of the child. It is an important resource of the biographer, since all subjects of biography are children first. In speaking of how prosperous Augusta, Georgia, was in Longstreet's childhood, he says, "Little boys could run a mile down Broad Street . . . without ever getting down off the cotton bags." (p. 17) The incongruity of stating statistical facts as they would occur in the incorrigibly pictorial mind of the child also increases the humorous effect of Wade's style.

Wade's second biography, *John Wesley*, is not as far removed from the center of the author's interests as might at first appear. Methodism, its origins and relation to the cultural development in the South was a lifelong study with him. *John Wesley* is less restrained in personal quality than his first biography, which after all was a dissertation at Columbia University. In some respects it represents the flowering of Wade's biographic art. But the two books on which his reputation is based are essentially the same. As already indicated, Wade seems to have begun his writing career with a mature, rich, somewhat whimsical, somewhat acid style which is entirely adequate to his intent. To those of us who were his students this style is recognizable as the man himself, as Swift said it should be. Wade says of Wesley the child: "When bread was passed him at the table, he would ask that the decision as to his taking any might be deferred till he could debate the matter in his own mind."[6] This sort of deadpan rendering of a character trait obviates many later explanations. Such a child would have to father a whole set of misplaced Wesleyan rationalisms. It is the method of all good literary art. Suggest something to the reader which he accepts but does not realize the full significance of. Later utilize that suggestion to support a line of argument that is far more convincing because the reader does not know the source of the conviction. Such a technique of recapitulation is far more vivid if the original suggestion has been crystallized into an image, as of a little boy consulting his own mind about bread.

Turning again through the pages of this delightful book one is struck with its rollicking but severely condensed treatment. In this case Wade passes incidental judgment on the neglect by John and Charles Wesley of all personal ties in favor of God and church while his main statement makes an owlish allusion to the evangelical insistence on spiritual rebirth: "Yet do not mourn, Susannah [the mother, who was chiefly responsible for the intense early religious training of the brothers]. . . . One thing in your life

they will make record of most marvelously, viz: that after living seventy long years quite in darkness, you happily got yourself converted in time to die a Christian." (pp. 107-108) In the introduction to Wade's volume of selections Davidson suggests that Lytton Strachey provided the only biographies in the English speaking world comparable to Wade's *Wesley* at the time it was published. The suggestion has point, but Strachey often becomes the victim of his own sprightliness, where Wade's similar note imparts a critical reserve so that his serious passages are enhanced by contrast. "Regard him," Wade says when Wesley is on his deathbed, "this old man, a child now without childhood's winsomeness. . . . Set not down as malice the self-esteem which told him that he, peculiarly, was God's messenger. . . . Bear with his mad teaching that the test of truth is one's own persuasion of it. . . . Do not grudge him that quality which so often made his very presence create an awe, as if he had been a native of another world." (pp. 295-296)

Of Wade's *Selected Essays and Other Writings* the biographical items are, as one might expect, clearly the best, and of those best I much prefer "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius." It is a fictionized life of Wade's own uncle, Jacob Walter Frederick (1851-1928), based on personal observation and family tradition. This family portrait causes one to look forward with great interest to the publication of Wade's narrative of his family extending into colonial times, a large volume completed just before his death. "Cousin Lucius" was Wade's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand,* the Agrarian symposium published by the Nashville group in 1930. Contrary to most of the other essays in that publication, it is entirely unpolemical. Cousin Lucius was a farmer and banker in a small Georgia community, a traditionalist but not unreasonably critical of the new order. The essay is an almost perfect ojpectification of what some of the other contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* are talking about. It is told with Wade's characteristic reserve that leaves the intelligent reader to draw his own conclusions. After one of the best of his typically dramatic death scenes the author says: "He was dead. And all who wish to think that he lived insignificantly and that the sum of what he was is negligible are welcome to think so. And may God have mercy on their souls." A recent commentator speaks of this essay as part of the "snobbishness, irresponsibility, and just plain silliness" that he finds in the volume in which it first appeared.[7] Such comments may be the price writers have to pay for becoming famous in their own time, but this group of writers has undoubtedly had more than their

share of self-appointed, insufficiently informed, poorly equipped commentators.

The longest and probably the best of the strictly biographical selections in the volume is "Henry W. Grady," written for the *Southern Review* in 1938. It begins enigmatically. Somebody says let's go riding: "Ride where? Ride around; and around." And before the essay is over, it is clear that that is about all Henry Grady's type of progress means. In Wade's portrayal Grady turns out to be part opportunist and partly the tool of forces he does not understand. On the whole it is sympathetic. But that does not decrease the totally devastating effect of the essay. For an unconscious psychology—if there is such a thing—seems to influence us in such matters: if with sympathetic treatment Grady fares so badly, how stupid would he seem treated unsympathetically? It ends with comic abandon, on a note unusual in Wade's restrained style, indicating that after all his control is not perfect—which is as it should be in a writer with as much to control as Wade has. After the touching deathbed scene, itself not without comic overtones ("Tell Mother that Father died fighting for the South and that I died talking for it"), Wade says: "Oh, the sweet poetic elegies, ever and anon drifting. Oh, the sermons—henceforth, adjured the Protestant Pope of the time, the Reverend Talmadge speaking in New York, henceforth let all men know it possible to be both great and Christian; Gladstone has said it, Grady has proved it. Oh, the memorial meetings held here and there—at the one in Atlanta a full panoplied chemistry professor collapsed from his emotion."

There are some excellent review essays in the volume, for instance, the two on Wolfe and Caldwell, written for early numbers of the *Southern Review,* the title of the one on Caldwell indicating the nature of the treatment, "Sweet Are the Uses of Degeneracy." There is also one piece of fiction in the volume, written late and published in 1962 in the *Georgia Review,* which Wade founded in 1947 and edited until his retirement from the University of Georgia in 1953. The story, "The Dugonne Bust," deals ironically with a cherished family tradition. It is a quite successful experiment in an unaccustomed mode. The same cannot be said for the eight short poems that end the selections. Wade is not much of a poet, but then he did not claim to be, and this rich volume would be completely representative without them.

NOTES

1. Andrew Lytle, *The Hero with the Private Parts,* Baton Rouge (Louisiana State University Press), 1966, 239 pages, $6.00.

Donald Davidson (ed.), *Selected Essays and Other Writings of John Donald Wade,* Athens (University of Georgia Press), 1966, 242 pages, $7.50.

2. John M. Bradbury, *The Fugitives,* Chapel Hill, 1958, p. 270.

3. *A Name for Evil,* New York, 1947, pp. 12-13.

4. *The Velvet Horn,* New York, 1957, pp. 354, 356.

5. *Augustus Baldwin Longstreet,* New York, 1924, p. 182.

6. *John Wesley,* New York, 1930, p. 14.

7. John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time, the Fugitives and Agrarians,* Princeton, 1965, p. 171.